

KUSHAN SCULPTURE
IMAGES FROM EARLY INDIA



The Cleveland Museum of Art
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KUSHAN SCULPTURE: IMAGES FROM EARLY INDIA
November 13, 1985 - January 5, 1986

A major loan exhibition, Kushan Sculpture: Images from Early India, presents important sculptures of two regions of north India, Mathura and Gandhara, from the 1st through the 5th centuries AD. The exhibition is the first to present important Mathuran art alongside important Gandharan art, thus making the first complete representation of sculpture of the Kushan dynasty.

Dr. Stanislaw Czuma, the Cleveland Museum's curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art, has organized Kushan Sculpture, which opens at the Museum on November 13, 1985, and closes on January 5, 1986. It will then travel to Asia Society Galleries, New York, and to the Seattle Art Museum. In addition to Kushan Sculpture, the Museum is organizing three related exhibitions drawn from its own collections and a rich and varied schedule of events as part of the nationwide Festival of India. The Festival is organized jointly by the Government of India and the Indo-U.S. Subcommission on Education and Culture. Dr. Evan Turner, director of The Cleveland Museum of Art, has been a U.S. member of the Subcommission's committee on museums for the past seven years.

Of the 130 works of art in Kushan Sculpture, more than a quarter are from the holdings of The Cleveland Museum of Art, which has the finest collection of Mathuran art in the United States. Most of the sculptures come from U.S. collections, with about thirty especially important loans from Europe and India.

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The Kushans.

The Kushans, nomads of Central Asian origin, entered northwest India through the opening between the high mountain ranges that has been the historic avenue for invaders. By the middle of the first century AD, they extended authority over the area from what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan to the region around Delhi, and dominated it for over two centuries. The third and most important Kushan ruler, Kanishka I, (AD 78-101), encouraged art and scholarship, protected all religions while ardently promoting Buddhism, and spread the Buddhist faith, and with it Indian culture, far beyond the borders of his realm.

Mathura.

A major cultural, religious, and commercial center of the Kushan world, Mathura was esteemed for its religious and racial tolerance. Brahmanism (Hinduism), Buddhism, and Jainism flourished there side by side, each mingling with and absorbing images and attitudes of early nature cults. The principal local material for sculpture was a reddish sandstone.

Mathura's sculptural tradition spans ten centuries, from the 3rd century BC to the 7th century AD. Its most vital and active years were the three centuries--1st to 3rd century AD--under Kushan rule. Mathuran sculpture in the Kushan period, whether Jain, Buddhist, or Hindu, was based on the indigenous sculptural tradition: idealized images of robust males (yakshas) and voluptuous females (yakshis) that served as semi-divine nature spirits.

Mathuran Buddhist sculptures are generally either free-standing images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, or figures which were originally part of the architectural

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decoration of monuments. Since images of the Buddha and of his compassionate intermediaries, the Bodhisattvas, were created within set iconographic boundaries, only the Mathuran artist's irrepressible sculptural sense, playing with volumes and movement, created freshness and vitality within these limits.

Figures from architectural fragments are much more varied and lively, partly because the artist had fewer rules and formulas for these secondary idols. Imposing physical presences of great vitality, these sculptured beings are partly nude or scantily clothed, their garments carved to appear transparent, revealing the yielding flesh beneath. Pot-bellied yakshas symbolize abundance, wealth, and protection. Voluptuous maidens continue the ancient tradition of mother goddesses symbolizing fertility, such as the imposing Nagini (snake goddess of the waters) from Cleveland's collection or the radiant yakshi from the Indian Museum, Calcutta. They are the Indian ideal of feminine beauty: a smiling, tender woman offering a body ripe with swelling hips, slender waist, and full, rounded breasts.

Gandhara.

Gandharan art had its roots in the Hellenistic tradition, first brought to the northwest Himalayas in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great's legions in their farthest thrust into Asia. An exceptionally beautiful Buddha Head, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, stands for the best of Gandharan art, wedding the clarity of the Classical tradition with the serenity of Buddhist faith.

Gandharan art's most popular image is the Buddha. Gandharan artists took special interest in the life of the historical Buddha, inventing the iconography which minutely details the events of his life. Almost as widespread are figures of Bodhisattvas, ideal beings who set a standard for the faithful to follow; their beauty implied purity and

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beauty of soul. The goal of physical perfection was sometimes sacrificed for dramatic or expressive purposes; the Emaciated Siddhartha from the Museum for Indian Art, Berlin, is a haunting image of the Buddha's superhuman effort to achieve enlightenment.

The favored materials of Gandharan sculpture are schist--a stone that comes in many shades of gray--and stucco, which, because it is soft and easy to work with, could be fashioned into vigorous and expressive representations.

The Buddha Image.

The image of the Buddha, the most important iconographic theme in Buddhist sculpture, appears for the first time during the Kushan period. The earliest representations were symbols signifying the presence of the Buddha: an empty throne, the Bodhi tree under which he had meditated, his footprints. Such aniconic representations derive from the Hinayana Buddhist doctrine that Buddha was a mortal teacher; there was no need for an idol to worship.

As Buddhism during Kushan times assimilated many aspects of ancient popular Indian religion, it became more complex and ritualistic. Mahayana Buddhist doctrines evolved, gradually attributing miracles and divine traits to the Buddha and stimulating the creation of images of the Buddha to be worshipped. Certain attributes and poses were adopted from much older Indian practices--for example, the Buddha's pose of meditation was adapted from yoga, and yaksha iconography was absorbed into Bodhisattva figures.

The effort to date objects is a significant scholarly aspect of the exhibition, which presents and publishes some works of art for the first time. There are only five known dated images from Gandhara, on which the chronology of the entire school

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rests. One of these five dated images is in the show, as is one dated Mathura image. On the basis of dated images and his other research for this pioneering exhibition, Dr. Czuma concludes that Buddha images are found simultaneously in both schools around the very beginning of the Kanishka I era, and argues persuasively for Mathura as their ideological and stylistic source. Stanislaw Czuma prepared the catalogue with the help of Rekha Morris, research assistant.

Other Exhibitions and Activities.

The three complementary exhibitions drawn from the collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art examine religious images in India, Indian textiles, and the relationship between Eastern and Western images. Films, lectures, musical performances, public events, and classes are scheduled throughout the fall of 1985.

This exhibition has been organized by The Cleveland Museum of Art with the generous cooperation of the Government of India and the National Museum, New Delhi. It received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council, an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities, and research assistance from the Indo-U.S. Subcommission on Education and Culture. A generous grant from United Airlines provides air transportation for the exhibition guest lecturers.

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For additional information, photographs, or color slides, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.